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# Heterosexual – the ‘normal’ delusion

Catherine Butler

To start with what I am not – heterosexual. I would use the term ‘queer’ to describe myself; I like the term because it is non-normative, which I feel is the essence of social constructionism and connects with me personally and in my work. Queer transcends boundaries of class, race, gender and sexuality and so connects me to allies who may define themselves differently to me in terms of sexuality, gender or race, but who are joined in our rejection of oppressive heterosexist, sexist and racist discourses. I also like the playfulness of the term in that it was first used as a way of reclaiming a word that had been used as abuse.

However, while queer may be *my* self-description, I’ve found it’s not popular with others because of exactly this blurring of boundaries, people find it hard to pin you down. For this reason, if asked to define my sexuality by colleagues, clients, students or anyone else I do not know personally, I might use the easier to understand term ‘bisexual’: viewed as the third option available between the poles of hetero and homo sexual. This is a shame, as it does not represent more fluid or continuum theories of sexuality (e.g. Klein, 1993). Continuum theories, like queer, break down boundaries and suggest that sexuality is not all or nothing one way or another; for example, a woman may define herself as heterosexual and have a male partner, but have sexual fantasies about other women. I think this perspective fits within social constructionism and systemic ways of working though our valuing of multiple perspectives and encouragement of the client to define their reality and the problem they would like to discuss.

Other than what to call myself, another conundrum of having both male and female partners is that when you have an opposite-sex partner, people assume you are, or have ‘become’, heterosexual (and when a same-sex partner that you are gay). This is perhaps understandable for new people you meet, especially through

your partner. However, what is perplexing is when those who know you, and know of your relationship history, assume that you have ‘gone over to the other side’ and hung up your queer credentials. For example, I do a lot of training on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) issues yet a good friend questioned whether I should still do this training – as if the queer part of my brain that contains LGB knowledge

has shut down when my partner is a man.

I’ve also noticed a shutting down of curiosity from health professionals if I attend a medical appointment and the subject of my partner comes up when my

partner is male. It is then assumed I am heterosexual and my relationship/sexual history will not be brought up unless it is me that does this. How refreshing to be asked “*and has this always been the case?*”

However, having a male partner affords me an ‘insider’s’ view to the land of heterosexuality as an ‘outsider’. And having lived on different shores for many years, it was an eye-opener to return! The thing that most struck and dismayed me is the rigidity of gender roles. Examples of this included that suddenly it was assumed that I did not know how to pack a car boot ‘correctly’, that I would be interested in having a half-hour conversation about shoes, that cooking BBQs were no longer my domain. I guess this might also be a reflection on some of the people I know! Similarly, I often make the ‘mistake’ of being overdressed – if it’s cold outside I wear long sleeves, then in a bar I notice I am the woman showing the least flesh. Again, that would just be the kind of woman I am, although I do not notice this difference when in lesbian bars. Is this something you the reader might also have noticed in terms of what is expected of you as a man or a woman that might not necessarily fit?

I was so excited when I discovered Judith’s Butler’s work on gender, where she describes how these ‘norms’ are not ‘natural’ but are ‘performances’ defined by heterosexual culture (Butler, 1993; 1999; 2004). Men and women play out their learnt and expected gender roles, impersonating constructions of masculinity or femininity respectively.

For someone like me, newly returned to

this cultural scene, these acts must be re-learnt to blend in. Similar to the popularity of a binary definition of sexual orientation, gender if also constructed as binary within heterosexuality

**The thing that most struck and dismayed me is the rigidity of gender roles**

(Foucault, 1997). This connects with my client work when I talk with colleagues whose clients have found their own ways to express their gender: we can discuss who might define this as a problem, as opposed to this being the problem to be addressed.

Another phenomenon, uncomfortable to behold as I feel a fraud, is the playing out of heterosexual privilege. Heterosexual privilege refers to those things which are given to heterosexuals, which are not asked for, but which place a heterosexual in a privileged position. We have been fortunate to witness a huge shift in many of these privileges in the last decade, including being able to adopt a child as a same-sex couple (The Adoption and Children Act, 2002), being able to have your relationship legally recognised and so reflected in tax benefits and life insurance/pension arrangements (The Civil Partnership Act, 2005) and no longer being discriminated against by providers of goods and services (e.g. turned away from a hotel) because of having a same-sex partner (The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, 2007).

However, many more subtle heterosexual privileges still abound,

e.g. being able to talk openly about your partner with colleagues without being concerned about others' reactions, holding hands in public wherever you like and not being worried about being heckled or potential violence, reading a 'lifestyle' magazine on public transport and not having to try and hide the pictures of couples of the same gender, etc. I wonder what other examples of this you the reader might have noticed? I've included some others in the story *Homoworld* (Butler, 2004) with touches on these moment-by-moment day-to-day reinforcements of the dominant norm of sexuality (this has since been turned into a training DVD and is available for free from the clinical psychology course at the University of East London, Stratford, London.).

I find these perspectives an invaluable resource when working with heterosexual clients. They allow me to be genuinely curious about the gender roles the couple have taken on, or about assumed aspects of their relationship, for example, the expectations of the other's gendered role might shift after childbirth. The enormous variety of ways to be I have learnt from my clients and friends provide a rich backdrop to unpick assumed 'normality' and co-construct individual creative ways to do love, sex and relationships. For example, I was working with a heterosexual couple who were desperate to have a child but had not had sex since she had been violently sexually assaulted. While we tentatively began a program of sex therapy, I introduced the idea that you do not need penetration with a penis to get pregnant and so the speed of our therapeutic work together did not need to be a precursor to pregnancy. Sure enough, the client conceived using a syringe while we continued a step-wise program building up to penile penetration much later.

I find this position of curiosity also fits well when working with couples from sexual minorities, given that there are no dominant norms on how to have a queer relationship. However, both members of the couple will still carry expectations about how relationships work, which may mismatch if these are informed by the model of their heterosexual family of origin. These models are reinforced in dominantly heterosexual media and



TV/film. Bepko and Johnson (2000) suggest that heterosexually-based internalised gender role expectations can suffocate same-sex couples. I wonder what alternative examples of 'how to do relationships' you the reader have come across, as well as our clients? If we had free rein to paint a picture of whatever we might want in a relationship, what would it look like?

This article has allowed me to share some of my personal reflections on my valued position as a queer therapist. My hope is that it has fostered curiosity in you the reader, resulting in more questions than answers. There are so many routes to expanding our ideas about sex and relationships, whether through stories shared in professional or personal contexts or via literature and film. The further from 'normal' I travel, the more possibilities and personal

freedoms I discover for myself and my conversations with clients.

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